The historical figures of the Republic in the process of reconstitution of the national imagery: Sidónio Pais and Józef Piłsudski

Abstract

The subject of this article is the comparative analysis of the role of historical figures and related national myths in the process of reconstituting the national imagery. The establishment of the Republic in Portugal led to a reformulation of the social imagery, which became apparent through “re-enchantment” (G. Durand), an outbreak of cultural activity informed by national mythology. The shift in the attitude towards myths during that period is vivid in literary texts dedicated to the main political figures, such as Sidónio Pais. In À memória do Presidente-Rei Sidónio Pais (In memory of President-King Sidónio Pais) from 1920, Fernando Pessoa applies the sebastianist myth so as to achieve the messianization of a historical figure. The use of Sebastianism with the objective of a renovation of national imagery culminates in Mensagem (The Message, 1934), the climax of a process of mythification of the Portuguese reality. In Poland, a similar crucial historical moment is the restoration of the national and democratic state in 1918, associated with the figure of Józef Piłsudski. General Piłsudski is a symbolic figure of independence and a protagonist of the poetic volumes Karmazynowy poemat (Carmin Poem) by Jan Lechoń, from 1920, and Wolność tragiczna (Tragic Liberty) by Kazimierz Wierzyński, from 1936. These works struggle to break free from the literary myths of the Polish Romantic era. The poems, highly intertextual and dialogical, are an attempt to demythify reality, which makes the role of national myths in Poland different than in Portugal. In the Portuguese context, the myths, though applied emblematically and incorporated in the Sorelian strategy, serve a purpose of national renovation, while in Poland, they are considered the main obstacle to the rebirth of national culture.

Key words: Sidónio Pais, Józef Piłsudski, Mensagem, national myths.

Myths are commonly considered the core of national experience. António José Saraiva defines the historical myths as “a form of imaginary consciousness with which the people define their position and their will in world history”.1 Miguel

Real calls the national myths the historical imaginary centers, charged with the function of founding or re-founding myths. According to Gilbert Durand, myths are ubiquitous in the human world, even if their presence varies in different periods. The present era was inaugurated in the late nineteenth century (a famous Bezäuberung, a re-enchantment) and marked by the return of myth, which revaluation is still very visible in all areas of life. According to the researcher, there are two main reasons of the rehabilitation of myth: 1) the saturation (the concept introduced by Pitirim Sorokin), understood as weariness, exhaustion of the predominating world-view, which leads to the demand of the other; and 2) the collapse of classical epistemology and the simultaneous development of anthropology. This re-enchantment was possible by overcoming the positivist paradigm, dominating in the nineteenth century, which led to the restoration of the mythical equilibrium through re-connection between myth and poetry.

In the Portuguese case, this process began in the second half of the nineteenth century through the recovery of the Sebastianism and the Fifth Empire myths and through the practice of their symbolization started by Oliveira Martins and resumed by Teixeira de Pascoaes and Fernando Pessoa. After more than a century of an apparent nonexistence (apparent, since they were at that time the object of the critical examination by the first generation of Romantics), these Portuguese founding myths (the Sebastianism and the myth of the Fifth Empire) find their most complete, culminating ideological and poetic form in the first decades of the twentieth century, corresponding to the establishment of the Republic in Portugal and leading to the reformulation of a Portuguese social imagery. The emergence of cultural activity inspired by national mythology coincides naturally with the establishment of a democratic regime and the attempt of the national self-awareness renewal. The most conspicuous manifestation of this process is the theory of saudosismo and the poetry of Teixeira de Pascoaes and the group of Renascença Portuguesa (Portuguese Renaissance). The idea of reformulation of the national conscience is a result of this attempt of the introduction of specifically Portuguese world view. This process was continued and developed by Fernando Pessoa’s cultural project, whose great part is constituted by the Sebastianist myth. This shift in attitude towards myths becomes evident in the literary representations dedicated to the leading political figures, such as Sidónio Pais, the assassinated president, whose death impressed Pessoa. In fact, Sidónio Pais was considered a martyr even at that time, deified by the social imagery.

Sidónio Pais is one of the historical figures, which often appear in Pessoa’s writings dedicated to the Sebastianist theme. Sidónio Pais is presented as the one

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5 Sidónio Pais (1872–1918) was the Portuguese politician and diplomat, the fourth President of the Republic, assassinated at Rossio Station on 14 December 1918.